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Accidents

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Analysis from the White Mountains of New Hampshire and occasionally elsewhere

Like many in the pandemic summer of 2020, feeling caged and, possibly, lethal, I sought release in our woods and on our mountain trails. There, where I've always preferred to be socially distant, I found an expansiveness absent in the confinements of cars, rooms, and even books. My feet could carry me deep into terrain, my eyes could see both details and scapes, and my other senses sharpened in familiar and unfamiliar ways. In short, I felt alive on trails. Even hopeful.

That thousands of other people, many of them new to the mountains, felt the same need became evident early in the season. Even as closures multiplied, trailheads filled, looking often like hastily assembled used car lots. That we had been warned or sworn off carpools only intensified the jams of parked autos. I learned all this via a few drive-bys and from friends who live in the Whites. Which sent me where I often go anyway: to obscure trails and ridgelines. I didn't climb a handsome, high White Mountain until a midweek October foray on Mount Moosilauke. Even then I picked a day with 30-mph winds that would scatter any virus trying to surf the air. I felt uplifted and well scoured during my hours on the south and main summits.

Still, wherever, I went, whether on local paths or the home ridges and woods of Mount Cardigan's Shem Valley, I took with me a redoubled imperative—*be conservative*; don't create a search or a rescue; just don't. That is a familiar note to self, of course, and to date, I've been lucky enough to have met its command, but it had been underlined by what I knew to be a very busy—and so, risky—summer for the groups that gather us back when we go astray in the Whites. New Hampshire Fish and Game warned hikers not to try epic hikes. That advice is ongoing, I think.

What follow are selected incidents in the very strange summer and fall of 2020.

New . . . ish Norms

On June 10, three teenage friends, Brendan L. (age 16), Casey O. (no age reported), and Isaac M. (no age reported) drove to Crawford Notch, parked amid the many, and at 2 P.M. set out up the Webster–Jackson Trail for Mount Jackson's summit, 2.6 miles and 2,150 feet above. Brendan took the lead, and early on they lost the trail and scuffled with the brush for twenty minutes before rediscovering it. That omen predicted a hike that would soon become a problem, first for the three friends, and later for passersby and NHFG.

Only Brendan had hiked in the Whites before, and his experience was minimal. Isaac told NHFG Conservation Officer Glen Lucas afterward that by the time the trio reached Bugle Cliff, Isaac and Casey felt they'd used what energy they had. "Why press on, then?" Lucas asked, and Isaac answered, "Brendan powered through."

This powering landed the three friends atop Mount Jackson late in the day, which was, happily, a relatively mild one: Winds were light, and the temperature averaged 46 on nearby Mount Washington. I say happily, because the trio carried no extra clothing, no water, and no food. The sum of their equipment came to a half-bottle of vitamin water and three cell phones. Feeling that his friend, Casey, was dehydrated and unable to go on, Brendan used one of those phones to call for help just before 7:30 P.M. Though phone service was sketchy, CO Lucas was able to speak with Brendan, who reported Casey's problem. Then, the call dropped. Lucas next got a return call transferred from 911 and learned from Brendan that Casey had been "seizing or having a panic attack."

At some point during this trial atop Jackson, the trio was fortunate to meet a group of hikers who gave them water and some food, which calmed the friends and allowed them to begin moving again, albeit slowly. On his end of the line, Lucas, who had been trying to talk the trio toward descending, decided the news of a possible seizure or panic attack was an imperative to send help. Two COs drove to the trailhead, hiked up with the necessary added supplies (among them face masks, which the trio was required to put on), and met the three teens, who were being helped down by the passersby. Everyone arrived back at the parking area just after 11 P.M.

Comment: The preceding story is so rife with errors that little comment seems necessary. But it appears here as example of an influx of novice hikers who flocked to the mountains (and to local trails too) when many of the usual summer diversions closed down. It also illustrates the complexity rescuers face when they get a call for help. Over the sometimes-uncertain connection of a

phone call, they must figure out how real the trouble is, the likelihood of self-rescue or rescue effected by passersby, and the resources they can summon. In this incident, Lucas was hearing about exhaustion, dehydration, a possible medical event, and a complete absence of hiking essentials. All of that reportage was questionable, as well, because the three hikers had no experience that could provide perspective. Add in that even on a "mild" night in early June, temperatures were likely to drop into hypothermia range, and the result is Lucas's tempered decision to send help.

While Lucas waited in the parking area, he identified Brendan's car, and when he shined his flashlight through the window, he saw marijuana paraphernalia lying openly on the back seat. As marijuana was at that time still illegal, that meant he issued a summons for possession. Lucas also learned that one of the trio had smoked before they'd set out. Lucas also recommended, as you might expect, that the three hikers be billed for the cost of the rescue.

In the dark parking lot, at the end of his interview with CO Lucas, Brendan offered this reflection: "I should have known better. I am an Eagle Scout." Shouldn't he have been prepared then? Lucas wanted to know. "Yes," said Brendan. "My scoutmaster will be very disappointed."

And . . . Again

June 29 didn't have a lot to recommend it for hiking, but amid its rain, Ryan E., age 21, and his brothers, Alexander E., age 18, and Noah P., age 16, set out at 3:30 P.M. to hike along the Moat Mountain Trail to Diana's Bath. That would allow roughly four hours for the nine-mile hike before darkness arrived. Their father, Adam E., would pick them up in the parking lot at around 8 P.M.

Adam spoke with his sons at 6:30 P.M. as they started down the Red Ridge Trail and again at 8:30 P.M., when they estimated that they were 30 minutes from the parking area. From then on, Adam had no further contact, though he tried both calls and texts to all three phones. At 9:30 P.M. Adam called for help.

NHFG's Lt. Bradley Morse responded, explaining that the boys had probably reached a place without a cell signal. Morse said he would start for the Diana's Bath parking lot and get there around 11 P.M. When Morse arrived, Adam had heard no more word from the boys. Morse called four NHFG COs, who drove to meet him. The weather was cool and wet; nearby Mount Washington's Observatory recorded 4.84 inches of rain during the 29th and 30th. Morse sent his searchers into the woods.

The wet night passed slowly, until at 5:30 A.M. Adam got a call from his sons; he had them call 911, and the dispatcher noted their location coordinates. The searchers covered the roughly half-mile to the boys quickly, finding them cold and wet but otherwise OK. They had fashioned shelter from their ponchos and simply waited out the night.

Comment: Again, little analysis is needed to find the group's errors. With its late start on a stormy day, reliance on cell phones, and then a willingness to call and send searchers into the night woods, this incident pairs with the first as one of a growing number of retrievals rescuers are being asked to do. The rainfall is eye-catching; going out on such a day also points out the twin imperatives of being "on vacation" and being in the midst of an isolating pandemic.

Photo Op

July 18 lies in summer's heartland, and these pages are often littered with the season's effects. Plenty of fiery heat woes, but, of course, missing from them is the other apocalyptic doom, ice. Not so, however, on this day, when a curious hiker went up close to see the underside of the Tuckerman Ravine snow arch. And got a close-up of its tonnage.

The collapsed snow arch in Tuckerman Ravine, below Mount Washington, after rescuers dug out Alphonse. NEW HAMPSHIRE FISH AND GAME

The day atop adjacent Mount Washington was a mild 55 degrees, 6 degrees above normal, and mostly cloudy. As would be expected, lots of people were out on foot, and the Tuckerman Ravine Trail was bearing its share. Beyond the steep and wild terrain of the ravine and its central trail lay an added attraction. The prior winter's substantial snowpack had left a snow arch where, once melt begins, the stream drops off the face and flows beneath the tens of feet of snow deposited by the winter winds. What remains in some years is an arch, snowy kin to the red rock arches of Utah. Such natural designs fascinate, draw our eyes . . . and us.

In the early afternoon of the 18th, 28-year-old Alphonse R. was part of a makeshift group of hikers who had left the trail to look at the arch. After taking photos and taking in the amazement of this delicately poised ice and snow, the hikers headed back to the trail and the rest of their day. Alphonse remained. He had with him a GoPro camera, and he wanted some selfies of him and the arch.

As he moved up into position, the arch collapsed. Nearby hikers described the sound as a "sonic boom." Alphonse was somewhere in the blocks of broken ice and snow.

Events and bystanders moved quickly. Someone called NHFG at 1:30 P.M., reporting an "avalanche" that had trapped one, possibly two people. Calls went out, first to nearby NHFG COs and then to Androscoggin Valley Search and Rescue, where longtime rescuer and Mount Washington presence Mike Pelchat took the call. Pelchat, who knows the ravine's terrain as well as any, said too little snow remained for an avalanche and speculated, correctly, that the snow arch must have fallen.

At risk to themselves, hikers stepped up into the blocks of ice and snow, located Alphonse and dug him out, moving him then away from the arch's remains. Uncertain of his injuries, they waited for rescue. NHFG Sgt. Glen Lucas was working with spotty communication and arranging help, including the possibility of a helicopter rescue if the hiker's injuries turned out to be severe. Over time and bumpy airwaves, Lucas learned that hikers had moved Alphonse from the snow and that no one else was beneath it. Clarity and relative calm arrived with Pelchat and veteran rescuer Diane Holmes, who assessed Alphonse as "banged up" but capable of moving with assistance down to Hermit Lake Shelter. They arrived at the shelter around 5:30 P.M. From there, an all-terrain vehicle transported Alphonse to Pinkham Notch, where an ambulance met him and took him to the hospital.

Comment: Wonder is a strong lure. Be it precipices, waterfalls, or snow anomalies, we lean and walk toward them; we want to see them up close, to get the little jazz of awe. As we draw near, they fill our vision and minds. Sometimes we lose track of what's around us—what's, for example, underfoot. Sometimes that brings trouble. This column points to repeated edgings-out to see waterfalls that lead to viewer falls. Some measure of this fascination drew Alphonse and others to the arch that day. What separated them from him was his need to show a relationship with the arch. He wanted a close-up. That he waited until the viewing group had dissipated before he went under the arch suggests that he knew he was transgressing. That a section of arch later described as the size of a basketball court would fall on him was beyond his imagination. But imagining what can happen is our first line of safety.

A small suggestion of practice: When I arrive at a point of wonder or awe in the mountains, I pause. Before I step toward that view, that ice, that inflection point for the day, I look around, locate myself, check especially what sort of footing I'm on. Once I feel secure in where I am, I look back up or out, where awe can have its way.

Given what fell near and on him, Alphonse was that day's equivalent of a lottery winner. He did, however, end up with a bill for his rescue, one I hope he paid with gratitude.

How It Should Go

At 4:30 A.M. on July 28, Giana D., age 26, and three friends, John F., Tracy S., and Dean G. (ages not given), left the Appalachia trailhead parking area on Route 2 to climb Mount Madison and traverse from there to Mount Washington. Atop Madison, they considered the weather (Observatory summary for July 28: average temperature 55, average wind speed 41.5 MPH, mostly cloudy with a few showers) and decided to return to the parking area via the Watson Path.

On the way down, roughly a half-mile before the crossing of Snyder Brook, Giana stepped on a rock, which rolled. She felt a snap in her ankle; pain followed, and Giana and her companions agreed that she had fractured the ankle. From there, they began to work on an aided descent through the rough, bouldered section of the upper path. They made some headway but also determined that they were going to need help, and so they called 911.

NHFG's Lt. Mark Ober got word a little before 11 A.M. and called the party back, getting John F. on his cell phone. Ober used the phone's coordinates

to plot the party's location as over three miles from the trailhead. Ober explained that summoning rescuers for a litter carry would take some time, and the group agreed that they would use this time to try to get Giana farther down. Ober set about collecting rescuers from AVSAR and NHFG's ranks. He arrived in the Appalachia parking lot around noon, and first responders climbed away from the lot just before 12:30 P.M. AVSAR's Diane Holmes and Mike Pelchat reached Giana's party just before 2 P.M.; they were soon joined by other rescuers. From the cell phone coordinates Ober could tell that the group of four had been able to get a half-mile down from the site of Giana's injury.

The Watson Path is rough throughout its upper reaches. Its crossing of Snyder Brook poses a steep terrain challenge. COs Robert Mancini and Lucas decided that carrying a litter through that stretch would be slow and more difficult than carrying Giana piggyback. Which is what they did. From the intersection with the Valley Way (reached at 2:20 P.M.), the litter party worked steadily down 2.5 miles. Giana's three friends took turns as carriers. Everyone was off the mountain by 5 P.M.

Comment: Lt. Ober's report from this incident outlines an ideal response, both from the group of four hikers and the rescue crew. Following Giana's rolled ankle, the group tested the possibility of self-rescue, concluding finally that they'd need help. When they called, they were able to say where they were and what had happened. Once the rescue was underway, the group returned to working their way down, shortening the upcoming litter carry with every step. Then, once joined by rescuers, Giana's three companions took repeated turns as litter carriers. Finally, Ober's usual check of a rescued hiker's pack found that the group was prepared "with all ten essentials recommended by hikeSafe," a safety program sponsored by NHFG and the U.S. Forest Service.

I've included this rescue both for the excellent effort the hikers made and to point out that even when everything goes well, rescues go slowly and are labor-intensive. It took nearly seven hours for Giana and her group to get down after her injury, and that getting down took also ten volunteers and six NHFG COs. The volunteers averaged five hours of work apiece, while the COs averaged nearly seven hours of work each. Note also that adding in Giana's three friends swells the litter party to nineteen, a good number for the frequent swapping out of carriers in rough terrain, where those carriers are often walking at the edge or just off the trail. The next time you're on a favorite trail, take a look at the terrain beside you and imagine also carrying a litter while walking there.

Lifted

On the morning of August 12, five friends awoke early at the Valley Way tentsites for the second day of a three-day Presidential traverse. As they hiked along the Gulfside Trail near Mount Jefferson, 35-year-old Scott A. began to founder. After conferring, the group decided to split up, and 36-year-old Christopher B. volunteered to walk Scott out along the Castle Ravine Trail. Scott's struggles continued during the early descent of this rough trail, and Christopher offered to take his pack to ease the way. Carrying two overnight packs unbalanced Christopher, and, not far below the ridgeline, he misstepped, landing hard on his right leg. A snapping sound and shooting pain offered hard news: Christopher had a significant injury that wouldn't allow him to walk. The two men were four difficult miles from the trailhead; they called for help.

At 2:45 P.M. NHFG's Sgt. Glen Lucas summoned CO Levi Frye to Lowe's Garage in Randolph to help set up a rescue for the pair. Lucas had a good phone connection with Christopher, and he was able to ascertain their location and have Christopher test his leg; Lucas also learned that, at around 190 pounds, Christopher is a sizable person. The remote location, the trail's rugged difficulty, the weight of the person to be carried, and the fact that there were two people in need of assistance prompted Lucas to check and see if he could request a New Hampshire Army National Guard helicopter. His request granted and the Black Hawk helicopter available, Lucas and Frye could direct the rescue from the valley.

Flying from NHANG headquarters in Concord, the helicopter reached the area and sighted the two men at around 6:15 P.M. First, it dropped a crew member using a jungle penetrator, a metal device about the size of a medium anchor, with wings that unfold for seating, or a point of attachment if the patient is in a liter. Typically, the cable attached to the penetrator is 250 feet long and the helicopter hovers between 70 and 130 feet above its target. The Black Hawk crew was able to extricate both men and then fly them to the Gorham, New Hampshire, airport. From there, Christopher was driven to Androscoggin Valley Hospital, arriving a little after 7 P.M.

Comment: As noted in prior columns, the NHANG flies mountain rescue missions as part of its training. When available, and when the weather allows it, NHANG brings speed and an ability to pluck injured hikers from hard-to-access parts of our mountains. As NHFG's CO Frye put it, "A task this large would have called for nearly 50 rescuers to be able to safely and efficiently carry the injured hiker down from the highest levels of the Castle Ravine Trail." I am not enthusiastic about the increasing prevalence of air

traffic and helicopter use over and in the Whites, but I do see how their use in this rescue makes good sense.

What makes less sense to me is the hiking group's decision to split up. Of all the escape routes from the high ridgeline of the Presidentials, the Castle Ravine Trail, or the parallel alternative of the Castle Trail, is among the most difficult. The likelihood that Scott would need more help than simple accompaniment seems strong; that happened early in his and Christopher's descent, when he took on Scott's pack. Had all five men been together, the four fit hikers could have divvied up Scott's load, likely preventing Christopher's accident.

Yes, it was day two of a planned traverse, and, yes, all five men traveled far (four came from Maryland, one from Connecticut) and so rebooting the trip for later would be difficult, but it seems common sense to see this retreat through together. NHFG's Col. Kevin Jordan, veteran rescuer and head of the law enforcement division that oversees backcountry search and rescue in the state, has often said that he can't understand how groups that plan to go out into the mountains together don't resolve also to finish together. I agree.

Choosing the Castle Ravine Trail for retreat strikes me as going the harder way. Slabbing around Mount Jefferson would have brought the group to the Caps Ridge Trail, a shorter descent, and one more likely to be peopled with extra help in the summer. The Caps Ridge Trail is also a hard trail, and it ends on the seasonal Jefferson Notch Road, but during August finding a ride back to one's car, especially when in need of help, seems likely. Imagining how we may best escape and how that shifts as we move through a day seems good practice for us all in the mountains.

Hard September

Every so often the White Mountain community hits a hard stretch wherein loss seems epidemic. September 2020 contained such a skein of loss. During a stretch from September 12 to 26, four hikers or climbers died in the mountains.

On September 12, 60-year-old Joseph G. died suddenly on the summit of Mount Jefferson. Samaritan hikers kept cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) going for nearly two hours as rescuers scrambled to send a helicopter to the scene. A NHANG Black Hawk lowered a medic, who then brought Joseph up to be flown to the hospital. Sadly, all these efforts couldn't keep the hiker alive.

On September 20, 34-year-old Benjamin K. was climbing the Moby Grape route on Cannon Cliff when a refrigerator-sized block of stone dislodged

above him. The stone slid across, severed Benjamin's rope, and knocked him from the cliff. Despite efforts by rescuers and climbers in his party, Benjamin did not survive.

On September 25, 68-year-old Michael H. was climbing at the Rumney Rocks when he fell 55 feet as a result of equipment failure. A climber with some experience, Michael had left his harness at home and fashioned a replacement from belts and straps he had with him; that makeshift harness failed. Fellow climbers responded immediately, and medical help arrived soon, but the climber died on the scene.

On September 26, three friends hiked up to see Arethusa Falls. One of them (whose name was not available) went on ahead, and when his two friends arrived, they found his body. Apparently, the dead hiker had climbed and then fallen some 70 feet from the top of the falls.

Comment: I was reminded of the way the mountain community feels loss together by a brief comment I got in an email from Steve Smith, *AMC White Mountain Guide* editor and owner of the Mountain Wanderer bookstore in Lincoln, New Hampshire, "Been a tough couple of weeks," Smith wrote as lead-in response to some information I'd sent on.

We in the mountain community can often see in our minds the exact locations of accidents, and we feel again our own proximity to accidents in those and other places. A current of connections runs from us to those who died; a quiet fellowship grows as we imagine what happened. We pause and think of all of us who feel called to go up.

Finding Refuge

September 12 weather was mild and clear, and as would be expected on such a Saturday along the Franconia Ridge, Mount Lafayette was chockablock with hikers. Among them was 50-year-old Patrik S., who had climbed into the day with his wife, Jennifer. Not long after noon, Patrik, who had suffered medical problems earlier in the year, experienced a seizure. A nearby hiker sent out a 911 call, which went first to Maine, then to Vermont; at 12:49 P.M. NHFG's Lt. Jim Kneeland got word and some limited information, but the earlier calls had been dropped, and Kneeland's attempts to reach the unidentified caller didn't get through.

What Kneeland did know was that the hiker in trouble had help from a nurse on the scene, who thought he had suffered a stroke (Patrik had reported having one earlier in the year). Kneeland then called the Appalachian

Mountain Club and asked that a caretaker from Greenleaf Hut go to the summit. At around 2 P.M. Kneeland heard from AMC that good Samaritan hikers had gotten Patrik to Greenleaf, where he had had another seizure. Greenleaf's caretakers, Eliza Hazen and Jake McCambly, told Kneeland medically trained hikers advised against hiking any farther down, and Kneeland contacted the NHANG to ask for a helicopter. NHANG was readying a helicopter for an emergency on Mount Jefferson (see earlier "Hard September"), where a man had collapsed and those on the scene were performing CPR. Doctors on Jefferson reported thinking that the effort would be unsuccessful, however. Kneeland conferred with Lt. Ober, who was directing the Jefferson rescue and decided the Greenleaf flight would take precedence. When he called NHANG to relay this, he learned that NHANG had been able to scramble two crews and so would make both flights.

Just after 3 P.M. the helicopter and crew left Concord; they arrived above Greenleaf just before 3:30 P.M. and lowered their medic to the ground. At 3:50 P.M., the Black Hawk lifted both the medic and Patrik to the helicopter and departed for the hospital.

Comment: Familiar themes run through this incident: rescuers working with patchy connections and partial information, the importance of passersby, and the importance of AMC's huts. And overarching it all is the question of speed of response, which, as information filters in, rescuers must try to answer. Here, as in an earlier incident, NHFG judged that helicopter rescue made sense. Passersby provided initial rescue response, getting Patrik to the hut and offering Lt. Kneeland the information he needed to summon an air rescue. Finally, the hut offered refuge and a place to wait at 4,200 feet.

The Huts' Role in Summer 2020

The pandemic suspended much that is usual, and as it gained purchase in the spring of 2020, it became clear to the AMC that its huts couldn't host their nightly swell of hikers who want to sleep and socialize up high. As anyone who has sat elbow to elbow at a table or clambered into and slept in a hut bunkbed can attest, a night in a hut is a close experience. Which is surely part of its lure—each night a little mountain community forms under the wing of some of our most powerful images of self, a hut crew of 20-something people bursting with life.

Once that possibility had been scotched, the question arose: What now? Fleetingly, AMC thought it would close the buildings, simply have a shuttered

summer. But that proposed absence worried many, among them those charged with safety in the Whites. I'm not alone when I characterize the huts and their crews as rescuers-in-place; often they are the best kind of rescuers—ones who don't have to go out at all—because their advice has directed or rerouted hikers who were headed for trouble. As a number of NHFG COs have repeated to me over time, "Who knows how many accidents and rescues hut crews and caretakers have prevented over the years. No one can count them all, but they are a huge number."

It then made sense to open the huts as stopovers for day hikers, and, significantly, as refuges when trouble broke out in someone's body, or rained and blew down from above.

AMC Huts Manager James Wrigley described the hope and work of summer 2020's huts this way:

> While we often identify the huts as fun places for folks to stay in the backcountry with the amenities of a hotel deep in the woods, the pandemic allowed us to show that they are more than that. The huts are places of refuge for people who are in trouble, information centers for novices hiking in the White Mountains, research stations in the backcountry, and places that offer basic services to mitigate impacts to the natural world. These aspects of the huts are as important as the centers of community offered by the meals and lodging provided in a normal year.
>
> So in 2020 we opened the doors to our buildings and put caretakers in place to fulfill the less considered but no less important functions of the huts. We offered bathrooms to the droves of hikers that came through, reducing human waste on trails. We plumbed water spigots to the outside of buildings to offer safe drinking water to hikers passing through. While this seems a service more than impact mitigation, keep in mind that New Hampshire was in a drought for much of 2020 and that water sources are often quite sensitive ecological areas. So in many ways, offering water at huts was as much about impact mitigation as it was about keeping hikers hydrated.

Wrigley also put me in touch with Lakes of the Clouds summer caretaker EB (Emma Brandt in the world beyond the Whites). EB reflected on that summer from safety and SAR points of view:

> I was going to be the Lakes hutmaster for summer 2020, but as April drew to a close and the state of the pandemic was only worsening, I was offered a

caretaker position there instead. The huts hadn't seen such a drastic shift in operations since World War II, when so many young men were abroad that they had older couples filling in for the summers. This summer, instead of a lively croo* of eleven, Lakes was run by two rotating pairs of caretakers and a researcher. We worked week-on week-off with pared-down amenities. We had no overnight guests, only sold prepared food, kept the lingering of folks inside to a minimum and offered trail and camping advice. Aside from ensuring we could concentrate bathroom use to our Clivus composting toilets instead of the fragile alpine flowers, the most vital reason for staffing the huts this summer was to provide emergency shelter and rescue resources.

The huts first and foremost are a refuge. The shelter that became Lakes of the Clouds was first built because of the deaths of Father Bill Curtis and Allan Ormsbee as they were en route to the 25th annual meeting of the AMC on the summit of Mount Washington in 1900. The alpine zone and Mount Washington are known for having the "world's worst weather," an example being that this summer during Hurricane Isaias the peak gust on the summit was 147 MPH. At the hut we were unable to safely leave the building during the peak of the storm and had to bring in all our research equipment, which can tolerate 80 MPH gusts. Thankfully we only saw a couple people that day, all in the morning before the storm picked up.

While we only left the hut once to go assist a hiker during my weeks at the hut, we likely prevented countless SARs by simply having the doors open and offering hot drinks, food, water, and trail advice. A number of times, I offered a cup of hot water to folks who seemed unable to spring for a hot chocolate or tea but were obviously borderline hypothermic. People were able to change out of wet clothes or just get out of the elements for a little to warm up.

Lakes of the Clouds also has an emergency shelter in the basement that we reserved for injured parties we didn't have to monitor in the hut. We had several groups use the space this summer due to knee injuries or exhaustion. It's a very rudimentary space but can prevent mild issues from turning serious.

While I was at the hut, we did have three more serious incidents, two of which necessitated having someone stay overnight in the hut so we could monitor them. For two incidents, hikers arrived at the hut needing care for heat exhaustion and a head injury respectively. On a particularly busy Saturday in July, we also had to send our researcher a little way down the Ammonoosuc Ravine Trail to attend to a hiker in need of assistance. What we thought was

* AMC huts' unique spelling of "crew."

dehydration or hypoglycemia turned out to be more serious, and this hiker was with us in the hut and being monitored for roughly 24 hours. We were in nearly constant contact with the AMC SAR person on call, who did have to consult with the AMC's physician. In the end we were able to hike the patient out the next day after recovery, but had we not been able to offer shelter, food, water, and medical advice, it could have become a much more serious issue.

In many of these incidents, the key element was having the hut and its staff right there. Had NHFG responded to these incidents, or other incidents that may have come about without the hut there, it would have been more costly and time consuming. People hiking in the White Mountains have come to expect the AMC huts.

Back at the Trailhead: Steward Notes

As noted at this column's outset, last year people crowded onto many White Mountain trails, and among us were novices drawn by the promise of time outside the close rooms of quarantine and simplicity of putting one foot in front of the other and going somewhere.

In recent columns, I've included a few notes from a USFS volunteer who works as a trailhead educational and safety steward. The federal initiative has gained purchase as one way to serve the public who would go up. Although the USFS steward program was suspended in 2020, Chris Elliot continues to view hiking in the Whites with a steward's eye, and I have a few more notes from his COVID summer:

After my stay as a volunteer at Highland Center in July, I also spent a weekend at Cardigan and then had another stint at Highland. The trails were packed, and the trailhead parking would often be a half-mile long on either side of the road. Everywhere I went, and I probably climbed fifteen mountains this summer, it was the same story. The *Conway Sun* reported a two and a half–hour wait to get access to Diana's Bath parking lot. Ferncroft Road leading into the Wonalancet area was jammed to the point of causing issues with neighbors. As the summer wore on even the conservation areas, nature trails, and smaller 2,000 foot mountains were being explored. Frustrated with out-of-staters driving to Sentinel in the Ossipee Mountains, one resident put up a sign that said, "If it doesn't say Live Free or Die on your license plate, get the F*** out of here."

I'm not sure what will happen with WMNF steward program next year. If there was ever a time when some guidance at the trailhead was needed it was this last summer, and while I can't prove it, I bet USFS revenue from recreational fees was down. As a steward I was in a position to remind people of the fee payment. I hope it will start up again next summer. I do believe it can be done safely with six feet of distance and mask wearing. I worry that the trails will be unable to take another year of poor hiking habits. A trail clean-up day in early August throughout the Whites generated over 300 pounds of trash. I found a sub-woofer at the trailhead I maintained!

Coda

The core of this column is always its selection of incidents from which we all can learn to wander more wisely. Each time I write about an incident, however, I know that I've left a lot out. There are always more factors that work to shape each person's approach and response to difficulty, and the terrain and weather also offer nearly an endless series of Xs on my list of accidents that could be accounted for and discussed.

But clearly covering a number of incidents requires compression. So, when I find a writer who pursues and shows the full story of an incident, who admits the reader to its sweep and details and aftermath, I want to read what he or she has written. That was surely true of Ty Gagne's first book, *Where You'll Find Me* (TMC Books, 2017), the story of Kate Matrosova's last climb. Even though I'd written two lengthy essays about this 2015 incident, I found new and compelling details in his book. "This guy does remarkable research," I recall saying to myself.

Gagne has returned with a new book, *The Last Traverse* (TMC Books, 2020), and in it he gives full account of both a tragic death and a heroic rescue effort. The incident, set high on the Franconia Ridge in winter 2007, admits the reader to the lives of two climbers trapped above treeline by a walloping storm, and it gives voice to the many rescuers who trudged and flew into the teeth of that storm. As with his first book, Gagne's research is superb, as is his ability to bring the story's people to you, and you to the site of their struggles.

Gagne is a risk assessment expert who leads the New Hampshire Public Risk Management Exchange (Primex), an insurer of and adviser to public entities in New Hampshire. He brings both a keen professional eye and warm humanity to his mountain writing. I always emerge from reading his work

with a more nuanced understanding of how risk and emergency are best met in the mountains.

New on the Block

As we reached the new year, and the days began to add their increments of light, I got further good news. I will be joined in this column by another backcountry presence and voice. Scott Berkley, a friend over time, has agreed to become assistant accidents editor. Scott brings his own experience to this work. Starting with six seasons of work in the AMC huts, he's gotten to know the White Mountains in all seasons on foot and, more recently, on skis, exploring ravines and ridges across the ranges. Scott's time as a member of a hut crew has also given him a close look at the trends in mountain travel over the past decade, especially as trail-goers have started going faster and packing lighter. On snow, Scott's been involved with the burgeoning backcountry ski world in the Northeast, working to outfit new skiers and teach them safe travel methods. Scott's winter work and travels have also been informed by avalanche courses in New Hampshire and Quebec. Scott and his partner, Phoebe, are moving to Sharon, Vermont, this year, where their backyard hill looks out to Mount Moosilauke and the Kinsmans. A longtime *Appalachia* enthusiast from the Millennial generation, Scott should be well positioned to keep us apprised of what's afoot in all seasons in our hills.

—Sandy Stott
Accidents Editor

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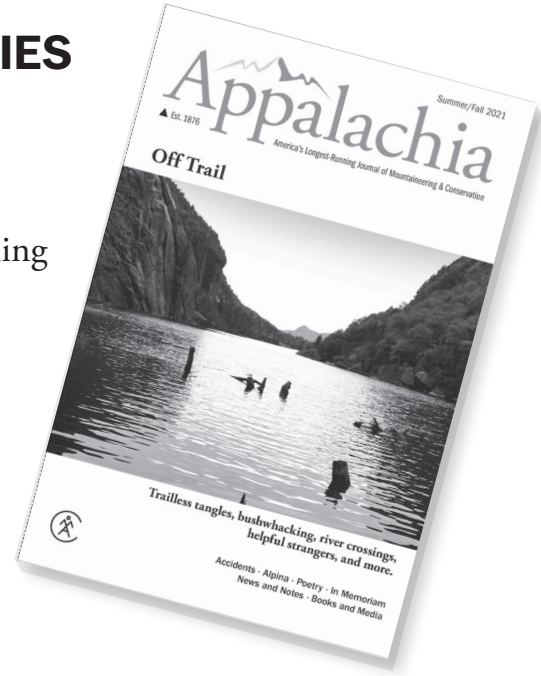

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